

Location



Introduction

The Kingdom of Belgium is a country in northwestern Europe, situated in the low countries. It is bordered by the Netherlands to the North, Germany to the east, Luxemburg to the southeast and France to the south and the North sea to the west. Belgium is a federal stated, composed of three regions: the Flemish region in the north (which encompasses the coast), the Walloon region in the south and the Brussels-capital region in the middle of the country.

The country's 67km of coastline are along the Flemish north sea coast. The coastal plain is mainly of sand dunes and polders, backed by dunes. Belgium has many rivers, as well as canals and dikes protecting the land from the sea. The country has a maritime temperate climate, with mild winters and cool summers.

Regional Seas and Biogeography

North Sea.

Habitats

Saltmarshes, tidal mudflats and reedbeds are found in the coastal protected areas of Belgium (see under biodiversity hotspots).

Biodiversity Hotspots

National Parks

The **Zwin nature reserve**, also a RAMSAR site, IBA and EU Special Protection Area, on the eastern part of the coast bordering the Netherlands, is an area with dunes, saltmarsh, reedbeds, mudflats, creeks and brackish pools connected with the sea. It provides an important area for many species of roosting, wintering and breeding waterbirds. Breeding species here include Pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), Mediterranean gull (*Larus melanocephalus*) and common tern (*Sterna hirundo*) and more than one species of goose breeds here.

RAMSAR Sites

Vlaamse Banken (the Flemish Banks), also a Special Protection Area and encompassing the **NordZee IBA**, is a beach zone in the central part of the Belgian coast and adjacent marine waters with submerged banks. The area is used by large numbers of wintering grebes and seaducks and provides important winter foraging and roosting areas for many shorebird species. Many thousands of birds are found there from late autumn to early spring.

Schorren van de Beneden Schelde, an inland site which is also an IBA and EU Special Protection Area, is made up of three intertidal areas with brackish, intertidal flats, reedbeds and marshes, also sharing its border with the Netherlands along the Scheldt estuary. It provides important wintering, staging and moulting habitat for many waterbird species, especially for Greylag goose (*Anser anser*) and common teal (*Anas crecca*), as well as breeding waders.

Kalmthoutse Heide, an inland site which is also a Special Protection Area and bordering the Netherlands, is a site with marshes and a large complex of stabilized inland dunes, along the Scheldt estuary and is important for staging waterbirds.

IBAs

Voorhaven Zeebrugge and Baai van Heist is an industrial area within the harbour of Zeebrugge, which provides breeding habitat for Little, sandwich and common terns, (*Sterna hirundo*, *S. albifrons* and *Thalasseus sandvicensis*).

Polderkomplex encompasses the coastal polders to the north of Brugge which consist of grasslands, ditches, canals and reedbeds and a small part of the coastal dunes near Blankenberge. Black-tailed godwits (*Limosa*

limosa) breed here, and the site provides important wintering habitat for several species of wader.

IMMAs

The Southern North Sea and Eastern Channel Seasonal Aggregation Area, which stretches along the north coasts of France, Belgium and the Netherlands, holds important aggregations of harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in spring and summer.

At risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (VU), Endangered (EN) or Critically Endangered (CR). A more complete list of IUCN listed species is found in Appendix 1.

→ At risk birds

The following species of seabird are known breed along the Belgian coast: Black-headed gull (*Chroicocephalus* - previously *Larus - ridibundus*), mew gull (*Larus canus*), lesser Black-backed gull (*Larus fuscus*), European herring gull (*Larus argentatus*), yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*), common tern (*Sterna hirundo*), sandwich tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) and little tern (*Sternula albifrons*). Species listed in Appendix 1 are largely winter visitors, except the black-legged kittiwake (VU) which is resident. Species regularly found in the nearshore and midshore area include several species of loons, the great-crested grebe, little gull, lesser black-backed gull, herring gull. In mid and offshore areas great black-backed gull, common gull, northern gannet, black-legged kittiwake, common guillemot and razorbill are observed.

Waterbird species wintering along the Belgian coast are largely 6 species: Eurasian oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and Eurasian wigeon (*Anas Penelope*). There are also several other waterbird species wintering along the coast.

Species that stranded on the Belgian coast during the *Tricolor* incident included guillemots, razorbills, great crested Grebes, common scoter, velvet scoter, red-throated diver, little auk, kittiwake, northern gannet, Atlantic puffin and various gull species.

→ At risk reptiles

Sea turtles are only very rarely seen in Belgian waters, with a few leatherback turtle strandings reported over the years. All sea turtle species are strictly protected in Belgium.

→ At risk mammals

Harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) are common along the Belgian coast, also grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) in smaller numbers. There are well known nesting sites for seals in Nieuwpoort and Oostende, sometimes in groups of more than 20, which are mostly grey with a few harbour (harbour numbers are higher in Ostende). Smaller groups of seals can be seen in the port of Zeebrugge and in the Zwin nature reserve. Seals occasionally venture inland and have been seen as far as Ghent via the Ghent-Terneuzen canal. Both grey and harbour seals are protected under Belgian and Flemish law.

All cetacean species are strictly protected in Belgium and under Flemish law, as well as the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) under Belgian law.

The most commonly observed marine mammal species in Belgian waters is the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), with the following species seen less regularly: humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and bottlenose, common and white-beaked dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*, *Delphinus delphis* and *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*).

Past experience with oil spill and potential risks

Although the coastline is short, busy shipping routes to and from the Channel pass Belgium, especially those that come and go from the harbours of Antwerp or Rotterdam, or the German Bight. Belgium is adjacent to the strait of Dover, one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. This intense traffic in the narrow shipping lanes creates a significant pollution risk, and these shipping routes are in the close vicinity of the wintering areas of many thousands of seabirds.

The Tricolor 2002 was a major oiled wildlife incident which occurred off the north sea coast of France in December 2002. Although only a relatively small amount of oil was spilled (170 tonnes), the effect on wildlife was extensive, as the spill occurred relatively close to the shore near an important area for wintering seabirds

(the Flemish banks IBA). Around 20,000 oiled seabirds were collected from French, Belgian and Dutch beaches. Belgium treated 5300 live and 4200 dead birds but was faced with an overwhelming number of birds coming in every day. This led to the development of Belgium's oiled wildlife response plan and to the Wildlife Rescue Centre Ostend building a new rehabilitation facility which is able to deal with oiled animals.

In 2021 oiled waterbirds and an oiled beaver were treated as a result of an inland flooding following heavy rainfall.

International and Regional Treaties and Agreements

→ Oil spill and HNS Response

- d CLC Convention 69
- CLC Protocol 76
- CLC Protocol 92
- FUND Protocol 76
- FUND Protocol 92
- FUND Protocol 2003
- d LLMC Convention 76
- LLMC Protocol 96
- OPRC Convention 90
- HNS Convention 96
- HNS PROT 2010
- OPRC_HNS 2000
- BUNKERS CONVENTION 01

→ Marine Biodiversity Protection

- Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS)
- Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA)
- Bonn Agreement for Cooperation in dealing with pollution of the North Sea by oil and other harmful substances

Oil Spill Response and HNS Spill Response

→ National Contingency Plan?

In case of a major incident at sea, including severe marine pollution incidents, the Algemeen Nood- en Interventieplan (ANIP) Noordzee is activated, which defines the multidisciplinary response structure for various emergency situations including marine pollution by oil and other harmful substances. The Governor of the Province of West-Flanders acts as overall coordinator of the ANIP North Sea Plan. The plan is being updated in 2026.

→ Role of Competent National Authorities

Within the ANIP, two crisis structures are defined, the Command Post Operations, led by the MRCC in Ostend and the provincial coordination committee, led by the Governor of the province of West Flanders. The Directorate-General Environment (DG Environment, Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment) owns the Belgian stockpile of pollution combatting equipment and is responsible for its deployment, assisted by the Management Unit of the North Sea Mathematical Models (MUMM - scientific assessment, aerial guidance), Civil Protection (responders and logistics), the Navy (On-Scene Commander, communications, responders, maritime support) and the Flemish Region (communications and maritime support). When the ANIP North Sea plan is activated, overall coordination of response at sea is under the Navy. In a major incident affecting the coastline, Civil Protection or the fire brigade will mobilise shoreline response operations and with municipalities with beaches for minor incidents.

As part of their aerial surveillance programme, MUMM conduct marine mammal surveys.

Oiled Wildlife Preparedness and Response

→ Formal guidelines?

In the case of a large oiled bird incident, the national Oiled Birds Intervention Plan (Interventie plan Vogels) will be activated, which was developed and approved in 2005 and updated in 2008. The plan was signed by the Minister of North Sea, the Flemish Minister of Public Works, Energy, Environment and Nature and the Governor of the province of West Flanders. If the ANIP North Sea plan is also activated, the Oiled birds Intervention Plan crisis team works in cooperation with that plan's executive committees.

The Province of West Flanders, will take a coordinating role in a larger (tier-3) oiled wildlife incident and mobilise a Policy Group in which all stakeholders are represented, including Governmental bodies, scientific institutes and NGO's. The Flemish Agenstschap Natuur en Bos (ANB) issue licences for rehabilitation centres in Belgium and are responsible for wildlife rehabilitation activities.

The ANB may also be involved in a wildlife response which impacts the coastal nature reserves under their jurisdiction (such as the Zwin nature reserve).

→ **Response objectives and strategy**

The Oiled Birds Intervention Plan aims to provide a structure for the safe, efficient and professional approach of a small to considerable oiled wildlife incident involving dead and/or live stranded birds, including a tiered approach for the application of man-power and equipment.

Licences for rescue and transport of birds as referred to in this Plan are regulated by a Decree of the Flemish Government, which also regulates the transport of animals to other EU Member States (and their release there in a suitable habitat), if there are no suitable or insufficient bird reception facilities in Flanders.

→ **Euthanasia or rehabilitation?**

The Oiled Bird Intervention Plan allows for bird rehabilitation. For so-called level 2 oiled wildlife incidents, where the number of expected oiled birds is higher than usual but still manageable, the aim is that as many live animals as possible can be rehabilitated in Ostend, with staff support from other Belgian centres if necessary. For level 3 incidents, where there is an exceptionally high number of casualties exceeding the capacity of the Wildlife Rescue Centre Ostend or WRCO, coordination will be taken over by the Governor of the province of West Flanders and WRCO will focus on organising a temporary rescue centre if needed (see more details on the WRCO under wildlife responders below)..

→ **Impact assessment**

In general, MUMM and the Instituut voor Natuur en Bosonderzoek (INBO – Institute for Nature and Forest Research) will coordinate the treatment of dead animals and live marine mammals. Impact assessment will be carried out by MUMM in cooperation with a few scientific institutes, including INBO and the University of Liege. INBO conducts research on seabirds, monitoring the occurrence of seabirds at sea, investigating the influence of human activities (including oil pollution) on seabird populations and also monitoring of coastal breeding birds. RBINS also publishes annual stranding reports that also include observations of marine mammals at sea.

→ **Notification and early response**

In the Oiled Birds Intervention Plan, a notification of oiled birds can be received by several parties: WRCO, MUMM, INBO, DG Environment.

→ **Wildlife responders**

The largest wildlife response organisation dealing with aquatic birds in Belgium is the Opgangcentrum voor Vogels en Wilde dieren Oostende (Wildlife Rescue Centre Ostend or WRCO), based at the coast. Its staff have travelled to participate in many oiled wildlife responses in Europe to assist with animal care and designing temporary facilities. In case of a larger incident, other accredited and licensed centres in Belgium will assist the Ostend Centre by providing equipment and man power, and also veterinarians from the University of Ghent. Vogelbescherming Vlaanderen (Bird Protection League Flanders) work closely with all the rehabilitation facilities in Flanders and will assist WRCO in emptying their facility (in cooperation with other centres) in order to accommodate oiled birds.

RBINS coordinates interventions involving marine mammals and turtles with regard to scientific investigations, collaborating with pathologists and veterinarians from the universities of Ghent and Liège, and with other authorities (eg. DG Environment and local authorities). Sealife Blankenberge responds to cases of live strandings of harbour porpoises and small dolphins and operates a rehabilitation centre for seals. The North Seal Team, a volunteer group, reports stranded marine mammals to the authorities and raises public awareness about the importance of allowing seals to rest undisturbed on beaches.

→ **Cooperation between stakeholders**

WRCO is a member of the EUROWA network and several of its staff act as EUROWA trainers in Belgium and internationally. WRCO is also a member of the GOWRS (Global Oiled Wildlife Response System) network. All rehab centres in Flanders cooperate under the support of the Vogelbescherming Vlaanderen.

In the event of an oiled wildlife incident, the Flemish Institute for the Sea will assist with coordinating media and information.

→ **Permanent facilities**

WRCO's centre in Ostend is a professionally-run rehabilitation centre which was purpose built following the Tricolor incident to serve as a general wildlife rehabilitation facility, but specialising in seabirds and. WRCO has experience with the treatment of oiled marine and coastal birds and works according to internationally accepted protocols. WRCO is the only rehab centre on the Belgian coast and working most often with seabirds, but some other inland centres, such as the Natuurhulpcentrum Opplabbeek in Limburg province and the Vogelasiel in Anderlecht in Brussels, have experience of catching birds on water.

The EUROWA network holds its stockpile of oiled wildlife response equipment in Belgium, stored near Ostend at a facility maintained by DG Environment. This equipment will be supplemented with net-bottom cages in 2026.

→ **Current processes**

Belgium is the lead Contracting Party for a new working group on oiled wildlife response created under the Bonn Agreement in 2025.

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Appendix 1

→ At risk birds

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Long-tailed Duck / *Clangula hyemalis* / Vulnerable / Wintering /
Velvet Scoter / *Melanitta fusca* / Vulnerable / Wintering / P
Common Pochard / *Aythya ferina* / Vulnerable / Wintering /
Horned Grebe / *Podiceps auritus* / Vulnerable / Wintering / P
Grey Plover / *Pluvialis squatarola* / Vulnerable / Wintering /
Broad-billed Sandpiper / *Calidris falcinellus* / Vulnerable / Migratory /
Curlew Sandpiper / *Calidris ferruginea* / Vulnerable / Migratory /
Black-legged Kittiwake / *Rissa tridactyla* / Vulnerable / Resident /
Atlantic Puffin / *Fratercula arctica* / Vulnerable / Migratory /
Aquatic Warbler / *Acrocephalus paludicola* / Vulnerable / Migratory /

→ At risk reptiles

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

→ At risk mammals

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-



BELGIUM

*Country Wildlife Response Profiles
A Summary of oiled wildlife response
arrangements and resources worldwide*

Nesting-Pupping (season)

Harbour porpoise / *Phocoena phocoena* / LC (OSPAR list of threatened and/or declining species) / Resident/migratory /